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General Synod recognizes the need for care of veterans



At General Synod 29 in Long Beach, Calif., I served on committee to bring the resolution "To Recognize the Need for Compassionate Care and Healing to Our Veterans" to the floor for debate.

This proposed resolution drew quite a crowd during the Educational Intensive on Friday, June 28th. Many of the

members of this committee were veterans, like myself. The Rev. Stephen Boyd of the Chaplain's Office at the national level spoke at length about what the resolution would actually do, and that it had mainly in response to the huge loss of veterans from church life after they returned home from overseas tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He emphasized that, of the veterans who were regular churchgoers before they went out on combat tours, 85 percent did not return to church when they arrived home. From his interviews with returning veterans he relayed how they felt they could not reconcile what they had had to do in the field with their Christian teachings and beliefs. Not only did they fall away from the church in response to this, but the rate of suicide was shocking. Veterans had reported that no one who could really understand them except other

combat veterans, and that the Veterans Administration medical facilities would treat them for a while with therapy and medications, but before too long the VA turned them loose and wished them good luck, prior to stable recovery.

These reports were shocking, to say the least. Many of the veterans in the room spoke up about the proposed resolution, feeling that while it was certainly a worthwhile endeavor, it had no "meat" to it. Some, feeling that the resolution was mainly intended to aid Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, spoke feelingly about veterans of all conflicts, stretching back to World War II. Others spoke of how they had personally witnessed that the influx of veterans needing care was starting to overwhelm VA medical facilities. Veterans of conflicts further back were pushed further down, some felt, and they wanted to make sure the church as a whole was aware.

Something else that came to light was that not each veteran is given the same level of benefits and care after their active-duty military time is concluded. Even some of the UCC chaplains working in VA facilities were unaware of this. I was one of the ones who informed them about there being 8 different levels of care for veterans. They learned that what the public thinks – "a veteran is a veteran is a veteran" – is not accurate. Not all are treated the same. Some are treated better than others. Those with non-combat conditions are rated much lower than those who suffered wounds and other aftereffects from combat.

Armed with these thoughts and information, the delegates came to the committee meeting on Sunday, June 30th, much better informed, and able to strengthen, streamline and make concrete suggestions for the resolution. The changes that were agreed upon were then brought to the floor of General Synod on Monday, July 1st. Two of the strongest changes came with the insertion of one entirely new paragraph which gave direction to the Office of Local Church Ministries to partner with the Soul Repair Center of Brite Divinity School in the development of resources for use by our military chaplains, VA chaplains and in local congregations to express compassionate care and a healing ministry to veterans and their families.

The other strong change came in the next paragraph which in the streamlined language read:

“ *Be it finally resolved that the Twenty-ninth General Synod of the United Church of Christ challenges the members and local churches of the United Church of Christ to serve veterans with healing care beyond established medical and military protocols and seek ways to welcome our veterans home, through worship, fellowship, pastoral care and advocacy to reintegrate them in our communities, and help to bring peace to veterans, their families and the world.*

There was one minor amendment approved, and with a total of 776 votes cast, the resolution

was approved by 99.2 percent of the delegates.

I was overwhelmed with joy that the UCC had done this, being a Cold War and Vietnam-era veteran, and one whose father and father-in-law were both World War II veterans. The moderator then called on all veterans on the delegate floor to stand and be recognized. The delegations were most gracious in their thanks to all the veterans. Only one resolution, calling for an ecumenical relationship between the UCC and the United Church of Canada, received a higher approval vote, at 99.7 percent.

Upon reflection, I had looked forward to serving with this committee, and my voice, both as a veteran and a member of the Southeast Conference, was heard and noted, in the intensive, the committee work and by speaking in favor of the resolution on the floor of the House. Many veterans and chaplains spoke with me afterward on Friday and Sunday and in the days following, and we talked at length about the resolution and how we could take it further.

We were all happy to have once more served to aid other veterans, this time through the work of our church.

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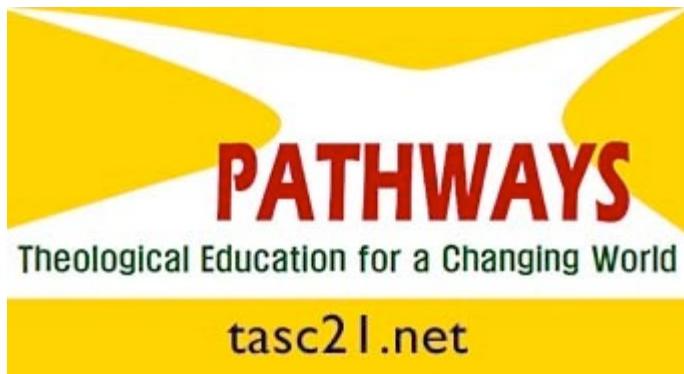
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